

SUDAN NOTES & RECORDS

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PART I



[TITLE PAGE]
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A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN IDLE SHILLUK.

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WHILE passing through the river ports of the Central District of the Upper Nile Province a casual observer is prone to comment on the apparent idleness of the Shilluk, as if it was the normal state of the tribe; and although such a traveller is probably within his rights in drawing this conclusion from the abnormal conditions under which he meets the Shilluk in river ports—for the native of the Southern Districts of the Sudan has certainly achieved a high standard in the art of doing nothing when on holiday—he is doomed to remember that the Shilluk seen on the river bank on the arrival of a steamer is hardly interested (and even amused) in all the strange sights that meet his eye: the steamer itself with its tiers of decks with the flag and masts on the roof, the motley collection of humanity on the barge, and by no means least the being or beings with his latest camera and smoking pipe and incredible costume.

Can one wonder, then, that the Shilluk is prepared to stand by hours and simply gaze on such interesting sights?

The writer is "on track" at the moment, and is so struck by the strong relief afforded by village life that he has fallen to the lot of the poet in justification of the listless Shilluk.

Looking long before dawn one finds that cattle have been kept up awake only throughout the night, and already shadowy forms are passing amongst the herds and making a loud noise, summary to get more benefit from the sun.

Dawn approaches and the herds are becoming restless, as every man turns to to collect them, and here or there another drives the cattle over some two or three miles inland, where they are known to be less hostile, and a first feed of dry grass is available to start the day.

Almost immediately herds of small boys appear on the scene, the smaller ones—from seven to ten years of age—being out the goods and sleep from the herds in which they have passed the night, and from

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233 the depredations of hyenas, and the boys of from ten to fifteen years
521 to clear up the standings of the cattle, collect the head ropes, and clean
527 out the huts.

By the time the boys have finished their duties the cattle are brought back to the village for milking, and the small boys leave with their herds of sheep and goats for pasture and are not seen again until nearly sunset.

524 Milking is accompanied by much grooming and cleaning of the cattle, and is one of the pleasant hours of the Shilluk's life when he handles his beasts in view of the world.

235 At about 10.30 a.m. the cattle are driven to their damp pasture
522 accompanied by an escort of fighting youths who are responsible for
523 protection against wild beasts, reptiles and predatory human beings.

236 Cattle and sheep herding by day is the work of youths and boys,
524 and is full-time employment from dawn to dusk—varied by a certain
525 amount of idling or to a recreation—as we will have them to their
526 duties and turn to the other than to see to what extent the stigma of
527 laziness applies to them.

241 At the time of writing the first rains have fallen, so every able-
522 bodied man who is not engaged in cattle herding leaves for his cultivation
523 area—which is generally at least three miles inland from the village—
524 before dawn; this early start because of vital importance when the
525 first rain falls, as the gulleys, food descend from the trees at dawn to
526 consume the seed sown on the previous day, and the cultivator is thus
527 unable to have his plot until after dusk, when these food have gone to
528 rot.

242 Women bring food and water to the cultivator twice a day besides
523 carrying out their ordinary household duties which we will now survey.

243 Shilluk villages for freedom from mosquitoes and other nuisances are
524 usually situated from one to three miles away from the Nile, and before
525 dawn men or two women or girls from each house have to go to the river
526 to fill all their available earthen pots and gourd with water for the use
527 of the house before the men go away to work; the ordinary earthen
528 gourd or pot when full weighs between thirty and forty pounds, and
529 two or even three trips have to be made to the river daily to supply the
530 needs of the house, as water carrying can only be done by the stronger
531 women and girls.

Houses are swept out soon after dawn by older women and small girls, and they are responsible for the collection of firewood for cooking purposes.

Very soon after the return of the water-carrying party the sound of dums pounding is heard on all sides, and this work and the preparation of native beer for the household goes on intermittently all day: the meal times for men being about 20 a.m. and 7 p.m., while the women snatch meals at odd hours.

At the time of writing every spare moment of the day is spent by the women in sowing the dums and maize crop around the village, the work proceeding steadily from dawn to dusk.

Even after dark the women have to finish the preparation and serve the evening meal to their men, and, as this is the main meal of the day, we betide the wife who has not prepared it in time or to the satisfaction of her husband!

At about 5.30 p.m. the small boys return with the goats and sheep, and these—after having been re-united with their offspring—are turned into the facks for the night.

Then smoke fires are lighted in readiness for the cattle which are lashed in at dusk, tied up with head ropes, and milked; these duties keep nearly all the men busy until after 7 p.m., soon after which the cultivators return from their labours.

Rather than call the Shilluk a lazy race, let us say that they understand the art of taking their ease royally!